

LAND OF A MILLION POETS

A Thesis

Presented to

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Morehead State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in English

by

Dorothy Bouzouma

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Accepted by the faculty of the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences
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LAND OF A MILLION POETS

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Morehead State University, 2014

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This piece is a memoir detailing my experience as an ethnic, cultural, racial, and religious minority in my husband's biological home, Nouakchott, Mauritania. The main story takes place over a three week period during which my family and I travel to Nouakchott to visit. The narrative focuses upon my personal experience as a Western immersed in another culture.

My purpose in writing this is part to portray the culture of Mauritania, a culture with a rich tradition of oral poetry, sensual dancing, excessive generosity, but also strict cultural expectations of male and female behavior and separateness, present day slavery, and immense poverty. However, my primary purpose is to portray my specific experience of the culture: my experience as a Christian in a dominantly Muslim country; my experience as a multi-racial minority; my experience as a female in a country where the majority of women do not have the opportunity for education or employment; my experience in a country that has few resources but is lush with generosity; my experience as a nonnative speaker in a country where only a few individuals I meet speak the most rudimentary words of English.

The narrative begins at the point of our arrival and acceptance into Nouakchott, Mauritania, a country my husband had not visited since he came to America in May of 2000. It details our arrival and immersion into the fold of a family none of us, my children or I, had ever met. The plot is not fantastic in nature; it portrays daily life: meals, entertainment, travel,

conversation, shopping, developing relationships. Yet in a different culture even meals and travel can be fraught with discomfort and perceived danger.

This narrative is multi-layered, focusing on my personal experience while also displaying broader thematic applications that touch on the human experience in general.

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Lay Over

When we get off the plane in Morocco everything is white. The sun's reflection off the sand is blinding and I fish into my purse for a pair of sunglasses. I will lose them repeatedly during this trip. Break them accidentally. I will catalogue sunglasses as the one item you can never pack too many of. Even with them on I must squint against the bleeding sun. I grab Amir's hand. You take hold of Soraya and Muhammed. Jacob, at 12, trails behind. We descend a set of narrow steps from the plane to the ground where a small bus awaits to drive us to the Mohammed V Airport.

We enter the airport. It is smaller than I have imagined. For the most part it is empty...the other passengers have already scattered, either to visit Morocco or to hunker-down in nearby hotels to await connecting flights. I am not clear regarding our own accommodations, but you have assured me they will be suitable. I am hoping you are right. Otherwise, our 15 hour layover will be spent in the Mohammed V Airport with four disgruntled children.

We find seats while you speak to someone from the airline. When you return I learn we will be put up in a nearby hotel. We leave the airport and wait outside to catch another small bus. When the bus arrives we pile in, claiming most of the seats. Jacob, Soraya, and Muhammed are full of questions, giddy with excitement and exhaustion. I hold Amir on my lap with one hand and clutch the hanging hand rail with the other. The children begin a diligent search for seatbelts.

Finding none, Muhammed asks, "Dad, where are the seat belts?"

You elbow the man beside you, a native African. "Seat belts," you say, both of you chuckling as if there is some private joke.

“Eh, you are in Africa now....the first thing we do when we get a new car is cut out the seat belts.” You and the native African erupt again into laughter.

I hold onto Amir tight as the driver lurches the bus forward. The kids sit free, unrestrained, all fearless smiles and joys, not clutching the hanging handrail as I do. We head towards the hotel.

In my dreams we visit Casablanca. In the months leading up to this trip I researched Morocco. I began a blog to detail our travels. On it I posted pictures of the Hassan II Mosque, streets lined with date trees, and the sprawling exotic city laid bare beside the sweeping ocean coast line. In my mind this would be the most exciting part.....the part resembling a real vacation. I imagined myself a tourist-- wearing khaki capris, strappy sandals, and a large hat to shield the sun from my eyes. I imagined we might walk the streets of Morocco--an American couple holding hands, peering into shops, pointing out the sights. We might take pictures on the coastline with the lovely mosque in the background or eat at a seaside restaurant serving traditional Moroccan cuisine. In reality though we are towing four children grumpy with jet-lag behind us, my hair is disheveled by humidity, and we have not bathed in 24 hours. Having eaten nothing but the meager-portioned airline food-- over baked palm sized chicken breast and a watery vegetable mix-- my stomach growls. An excursion into Casablanca is the furthest thing from my mind.

I learn our hotel is not in the heart of the city but is built in sand. Casablanca is 20 miles away and I never set eyes on the beauty I once perused on the internet. For miles all I see is flat, desert land, but otherwise it is a typical hotel. After settling our stuff in our room we go down to the lobby in search of food. In the lobby we find one restaurant and although it is midday in Morocco, the restaurant is closed. You find the owner. Speaking to him in Arabic you negotiate a real meal. American money talks. The six of us eat cold sandwiches and French fries at the cost of one hundred US dollars.

The fact I have crossed the Atlantic is hard for me to believe. For years of our marriage I told you I would never go...would never cross an ocean on an airplane...would never take my children to a foreign place whose language I could not speak, whose religion I did not share. For years of our marriage I believed my own voice and it was the only one I could hear. But that was when I was young...before I carried our babies under my ribs, before I traced the shape of their noses, the outline of their jaws, before I loved you and them more than I loved myself.

Back in our hotel room, after the meal, we try to find sleep. But sleep eludes us. We take lukewarm showers, change out of our clothing, sticky with heat. I have purchased the children brand-new wardrobes for the trip, charging everything to various department store cards. During this trip their clothing will become burdened with sand and mud, stained by sweet candies and coca cola. But in the moment I only think how I might present them as a gift, a perfect looking package for your family to see for the first time.

We lie beside each other on the rough bedspread in quiet anticipation while the kids sit in the floor coloring in books I have brought from home, working crossword puzzles, pushing

matchbox cars along the ratty carpet. We hold hands, side by side, and our fingers intertwine. My skin is made paler against the darkness of yours. We have spent years moving towards this moment and it leaves us speechless, inept. We lay for hours, silent.

Before dusk we go down to the lobby to wait for the bus that will take us back to the airport. Outside in the humidity I find a corner to hide and smoke. The land as far as I can see is bare and brown. The evening sun is harsh and unforgiving...few plants sprout from the cracked ground. There is grass though and landscaped shrubs around the hotel walls. The people coming in and out are exquisitely dark, exotically beautiful. They speak in fluid accents....Arabic, French, Spanish. I might look at them, raise my eyes, say "hello," nod a greeting, or smile. Instead, I stare at the ground. My words close up in my throat. I am made mute by fear. I do not want to say "hi," be asked a question, told a statement I cannot understand. I imagine myself blending into the dark concrete wall...invisible.

The flight from Morocco to Mauritania is short--less than an hour. I am meeting your entire family-- your mother, father, sisters, and brothers--for the first time. I want to look my best so I take a compact out of my purse. Looking into the mirror I reapply my lip gloss, brush more blush across my cheeks. But it is no use; everything wilts in the humidity. When we are close to landing, you tell me to put on my melhfa. The piece is not expensive but a cheap blue scratchy fabric, borrowed from your friend's wife. Still it is lovely. She has already knotted the holes, where my head and one arm should go through, in it correctly. Before we left New York she worked tirelessly to teach me to arrange the melhfa correctly. Still I struggle. A Mauritanian woman sitting behind us offers help. She puts my left arm through the first hole and my head through the second. She takes the left-over material and wraps it around my upper torso, over the

top of my head so it covers my hair, and lets it rest over my left shoulder. I sit down, itchy and uncomfortable with the material hugging my body tightly. I take my compact mirror out of my purse for a last look. All of me is covered except my face. My hair is wild and strands curl rebelliously from under the top of the melhfa. My hair is my best feature and it pains me to cover it so completely. But wearing the melhfa feels non-negotiable...an expectation I cannot ask you to reconsider. Under the weight of the melhfa I am transformed...perhaps I am a pale faced Moor...a Muslim woman from Mauritania who speaks French and Hassaniya, who sits Indian-style while making tea. But looking in the mirror I am not fooled. I appear as an imposter. I am none of these.

We begin our descent, slow and turbulent. I am weak with nervousness. You have assured me I will be well-loved. "They will love you because I do," you have told me. But such a thing seems unlikely. How easy the world might be if a man's mother loved his wife simply because the man did. I clutch Amir, who is sitting on my lap, tightly. This grounds me...reminds me I am after all his mother and your wife. There is a heavy drop as the plane's wheels hit the pavement, the feeling we are moving forward too quickly, propelled by forces we no longer control, and we cannot turn back.

Home Coming

Through the throng of people waiting to have their passports checked, you spot your brother, Lemhaba. In the last picture you took with him, twelve years earlier, he is a little boy—ten or eleven years old. Now he is a man, tall and wiry, home on military leave, and dressed in uniform. Although younger, he now towers half a foot taller than you. Beside him I see your aunt, Celam—the only familiar face in the crowd. Years ago, before any of the kids had been born, we visited Celam and her husband, who had a US work visa and lived in Cincinnati, every other weekend. I remember those visits now. Celam's kindness, generosity, openness, and also her fears. In the Cincinnati mall she refused to ride the escalators...always choosing to take the stairs; we traveled the interstate while Celam prayed furiously in the backseat, sure we were headed towards our deaths, until you exited onto a back road with fewer lanes and slower traffic; she swore my earache could be cured by a heated match head pressed against my ear lobe. And old Mauritanian wives tale that proved painfully untrue. I feel calmer seeing her face. She is waving at me furiously, saying my name over and over again. I smile and wave back, lift the kids up over the crowd so she can see their faces for the first time.

Lemhaba breaches the crowd and motions the kids and me to leave the line and come outside. You stay to check our visas with the immigration officials. As we make our way out of the airport my heart stills to see the number of people waiting for us. They are a swarm of bees...I cannot count them...cannot see the streets around them. The women hover around us talking animatedly, speaking Hassaniya. Like a well-orchestrated dance, they move us forward with their bodies out into the street, across the road to empty metal benches. I look for you as we move, overwhelmed, but cannot see you above their heads. They tell me their names: Horia,

Nouha, Maima, Nana, Molai. I cannot remember them all. The women touch, hug, and kiss me. They press my face between their palms and call me *Zahna*....Beautiful.

The kids have scattered. I peer above the heads to try and see them. Muhammed rides high on someone's shoulders, laughing, smiling, unconcerned. Jacob is surrounded by family members and although they are not his family, they appear happy to see him. Soraya sits not far away in someone's lap.... Amir is the only one who clings to me, holding onto the bottom of my melhfa, refusing to get lost in the crowd.

A woman sits beside me on the bench. She introduces herself as Maima, your step-mother. She knows some rudimentary English and because of this there seems to be the expectation she try to communicate with me. We attempt to talk, but it is an ugly affair. I understand everything she asks: "How was your trip? Are you tired?" But she does not understand my labored responses. It does not seem to matter though. No one cares if we understand each other; they are simply overjoyed we are here.

I notice a woman beside me, her melhfa brushing my knees. She is the only person sitting on the ground. She is small and dark, completely unassuming. She takes my hands, kisses them, presses my palms to her face. It is your mother, Fatamat, and I recognize her from a picture--the same one Lemhaba is in, taken on the day you left Nouakchott, Mauritania in the year 2000. She is not beautiful but I can tell she was once. She is the quietest of everyone...maybe she is crying or praying. I cannot tell. There are no words between us. But no words are needed. She has been waiting for you for a long time. And I have brought you back to her.

First Day

When we arrived I expected we would visit your mother first. But I learn the night of our arrival, we are to visit your father's home instead. We take separate vehicles with Soraya, Amir, and I riding with one group of family members while you, Muhammed, and Jacob ride in a separate car. Sticking your head into the car you tell me, "We will go to dad's tonight. And we will go to mom's in morning."

I am faintly aware your family members have argued...over who we should visit first. Your mother has barely put her arms around you, kissed you on the forehead, pressed your cheeks between her palms. Mauritania, unlike other predominantly Muslim countries, has a staggeringly high divorce rate. Maima is your father's fourth wife. Between all of them he has 12 or 13 children. This conflict in part seems to be the result of this cultural anomaly. Something sharp settles in my heart. I want to protest but all other family members seem to have accepted that we will visit your father's home first. Your mother has faded into the background. Amongst the family members still in the parking lot, I do not even see her.

We travel down a highway in the late night, early morning hours. The sky is completely dark and the street lights barely illuminate the world around us. The paved roads soon turn to sand. Peering out the window I catch my first glimpses of Nouakchott...barren and harsh yet beautifully mysterious.

We do not stay long at your father's home. It is late. We are exhausted. The time is a blur. When we are finished visiting we go to our apartment. Before our trip we discussed staying with family or paying for a hotel, but your father and step-mother own an apartment complex so they made one of their tenants move so that we might have our own apartment.

In the darkness I cannot see much. We walk up stairs made of concrete. The balcony light is on and I see the complex is made of cement and painted a burnt orange. Inside the apartment looks small but more comfortable and roomy than a hotel. The balcony is charming with a clothesline strung across its length. There are thick steel bars over every window to prevent thieves from entering. The children sleep on the floor of the sitting room on pallets made of old bedspreads. You and I sleep in the only bedroom. The room is large and contains an armoire, a vanity, and a queen sized bed. We put our bags down but do not unpack. Exhausted, we try to fall in to sleep. Our mattress is the hardest thing I have ever felt. I toss and turn unable to get comfortable. Sleep eludes me that first night, but you have no trouble at all.

The next morning I awake before everyone else, put on my melhfa, and make my way to the balcony. The maid comes up from his make-shift shelter, consisting of a folded mattress, a duffel bag, and a tiny TV with rabbit ears housed in a 2 car garage, and leaves fresh bread with butter and jam on the dining room table. He takes up the kids bedspreads and beats them with a small hand-held broom before hanging them on the clothes line. He takes the rugs out and beats them also. Then bending low he uses his tiny broom to sweep from one end of the carpeted apartment to the other until there is not one fragment of dirt on the floor. This routine I will learn well...it will be repeated daily for the entirety of our stay.

I sit on the balcony smoking while the maid goes about his tasks. The sun is already high. Peering over the balcony's edge I see flat land and sand for miles....little kids run bare foot, sand swimming around their ankles. Directly across from us sits another apartment complex. Like ours, it is built of concrete but its white paint and sleeker structure give it a more modern appearance. It is enclosed by a locked steel gate that must be opened by a man who stands guard at the complex. A vacant sand-filled lot sits beside it, containing only a covered fruit and vegetable stand and a tied up goat. A family mans the stand....a father, mother, a little baby, and some other children are gathered under the tarp of the stand hiding from the heat. We will leave our apartment that day and when we return at midnight, the flaps of the fruit stand will be closed forming a tent. Underneath the edges of the tent I will see the glow of a television screen. It is then I will learn that it is not only a fruit stand but also a home.

Our first day at your mother's house, I find myself overwhelmed. When we arrive we are greeted with the traditional Hassaniyan phrases *Shahalak yak le bas...yak mohavine....* these are phrases I am familiar with, but the women speak them so quickly, grabbing me and hugging me to them, laughing, smiling. They are boisterous and excited. They do not pause, as we do in America, to give time to respond to their greeting but simply continue talking. I think of the Hassaniyan phrases I know but they sound false in my mind....strings of consonants, uttered syllables with no meaning. Instead of speaking what I know I smile, look down, raise my hand, and say "hi" sheepishly. This elicits giggles from almost everyone.

As soon as we enter the house I see an open tiled, entryway. We pass a staircase on the right, which leads to the roof top, and head towards the door of the sitting room on the left.

Before we enter the room we take off our shoes, leaving them beside the doorway. Each home has a sitting room used to host guest. It is typically the nicest room in the house. The sitting room in your mother's house has been upgraded specifically for our visit. In a corner sits our 32 inch flat screen television we shipped over months before. Two months prior to our trip we purchased an air conditioning unit, which now sits snugly above one window in the sitting room. These upgrades were not completed to impress us, but rather to make the room more suitable for the various guests that will visit during our stay. There are no couches in the room but cushions, which sit low to the floor, lining the majority of the walls. The floor is covered in elaborately designed matching rugs. Your older sister, Nouha, leads me into the room and motions for me to sit on a particular spot in the floor.

We sit for hours in the floor. The kids dart in and out of the room while the adults talk and laugh. I yell at them to "stop" and try to rise to contain them. I am stopped by Nouha's gentle but firm hand on my shoulder. "No, Dorothy," she says and gives me a reprimanding look which I can only assume means she does not want me chasing after or yelling at the kids. Before coming you told me I would be treated like a "Queen." There is an unspoken expectation that I sit and allow others to care for me...a luxury to which I am not accustomed.

It will be hours before the food is ready. It is being prepared at some other place in the home which I do not have any real knowledge of nor ever see. Your younger sister, Nana, and the maid bring in a platter of yogurt, fresh goats milk, and fresh fruit. They urge me to try the milk which I do reluctantly. It is too bitter and also warm but I keep the glass beside me pretending to sip on the drink every so often. I taste the fruit. It is good, usual, nothing exotic. I stretch my legs out because they are starting to cramp and Nouha places a cushion underneath my knees. Nana sits down beside me, and using a handkerchief, wipes the sweat that has formed

above my brow. She then opens a Danon Strawberry yogurt and begins to feed it to me using a spoon as if I am a baby.

I ask you where I might go smoke. You translate my request into Hassaniya for Nouha. Your family wants me to smoke in the sitting room but I am uncomfortable. No one else is smoking. I insist on smoking elsewhere. Nouha leads me out of the sitting room into the hallway. At the end of the hallway I see an open area full of people I did not know were even in the house. They smile, grab for my hands, tell me *Shahalek yak le bas*. Nouha leads me on to another room. The room is bare with a hard green carpet I sit on. There is no air conditioning but the barred windows are open. I see children playing outside. There is no bed, no furniture with the exception of a large green armoire in the corner. I am brought an ashtray and I smoke in peace and privacy.

The bathroom is in this room. I go inside but leave the door cracked because there is no light. There is a shower space, a sink, a toilet. I use the bathroom. I attempt to flush the toilet, wash my hands, but there is no running water, no soap, and no toilet paper. I tell you I have used the bathroom but there is no water. Nouha brings a bucket of water from an unknown place and pours it down the toilet, causing it to flush.

When I return to the sitting room no one has changed places, although new people have arrived. I am not sure who they are. You tell me their names and relationships, but there are too many for me to associate faces with names. I sit again in the floor. Listen to the conversation, although I have no part in it. I want to ask you to translate, to include me, and yet I cannot make the request. I have no desire to be burdensome.

A year before our trip I asked you to teach us Hassaniya. You arrived home late from work, tired and irritable. Stretched out in front of your iPad you ignored me or gave a half-hearted “okay” that never materialized into lessons. I scoured the internet for days but could only find resources for learning traditional Arabic while I desired to learn the Hassaniyan dialect of Arabic. After a week of searching I stumbled upon a printable pdf version of a Peace Corp manual aimed at teaching new workers the Hassaniyan dialect and important aspects of the Mauritanian culture.

Sitting at our old desktop I printed the manual...70 pages. The kids and I spent the summer learning Hassaniya. We made flash cards, writing the word in Hassaniya on one side and drawing a representative picture on the other. We wrote sentences in English, leaving a blank spot for the Hassaniyan vocabulary word. And although we learned a few words and phrases, which we excitedly spoke to you upon your arrival home from work each night, we never mastered the language.

On the internet I read English is one of the most difficult languages to learn. All of the words separate, enclose upon themselves. In Hassaniya the words are interconnected so that *khayma*, “tent,” is modified to form the word *metkhayma*, “marriage.” They are connected in that when a couple marries they literally share a “tent” or “dwelling.” And although we never mastered the Hassaniyan dialect, this connecting made sense...the way one thing might build upon another, the way learning one word might allow you to understand a host of other words you had never heard spoken.

Home Sickness

On my third day in Nouakchott I am overcome by a foul mood. I am naturally talkative and social but even in a room full of people I am alone. When everyone is talking I strain to pick up the few grains of words I know, but understanding the language is like sifting rice—most of the words fall through the cracks of my understanding.

I have lost the most basic elements of my life. I am unable to drive. Traffic moves slowly but because there are no stop signs and no traffic lights, driving requires a certain aggressiveness I do not possess. If I were brave enough to drive, I still would not be able to do it alone. Having limited understanding of the language I would have no idea how to ask for directions, how to ask for help if I needed it. The streets in Nouakchott are winding with known names but no signs indicating the names. I am never sure where I am despite us traveling the same routes daily.

I carry no money on me. If I carried money it would not matter. I do not understand the currency. The bills and coins are foreign to me. I have no idea of their worth. Everything I need I must ask someone else to purchase.

You told me we would get international minutes for my cell phone once we arrived, but you underestimated the difficulties of securing the minutes. After three days in Nouakchott I have not spoken to my mother or any family member. I have not even been able to find an internet connection and send them a Facebook message.

My mother, who is only 55, is in a nursing home receiving rehabilitation for a mid-foot amputation...the result of diabetic complications. Across the ocean, this fact takes on new significance. She could be ill. Her body could be ravaged by infection and I would have no idea.

Throughout the day I become increasingly paranoid, convinced that in my absence my mother will die. At home my mother feels increasingly burdensome, but seeing you with your own mother I am more aware of what it might mean to lose a child, have a child cross the ocean and never return. My mother does not know I have arrived safely or at all. I feel a tenderness I have not felt for her in years...an infantile yearning to hear the first voice that ever spoke into my ear. Yet I cannot share my feelings with you. The sense I am a burden...an unspeaking, non-driving burden that must be cared for...burns inside of me. I cannot speak what I feel and yet the feelings are present just the same. I complain about inconsequential matters. I become sarcastic and belittling.

We go to your mother's house that morning. Your brother, Dadah, has been staying with us each night and is in the backseat of the SUV with Muhammed and Soraya on his lap. There is an edge to me so that every word I speak is cutting. At first everything I say is meaningless, but aimed to hurt. This is how I argue, attempt to confront the issue. I say everything but the true thing. When I am near tears, I finally arrive at the truth...and explain I have been here three days and have not called my mother on the telephone...you tell me you will get me a phone to use. At your mother's house you borrow Nouha's phone which has minutes for international calling on it.

The Atlantic

Most of our days are spent in casual conversation and dining at different family members' homes. We are rarely, if ever, alone as a family. Our children have never been to the beach, never seen an ocean. Nouakchott sits on the Atlantic coast and we decide to go see the ocean. We drive on a highway outside of Nouakchott. Dadah comes with us. Amir sits in the front seat on my lap. Dadah and the kids are piled in the back. Muhammed sits on Dadah's lap and they play a game where Dadah puts his hands over Muhammed's ears and alternates between saying "monkey" and "donkey." Muhammed finds this game hilarious. The SUV we have rented comes with one American CD, Craig Davis. We listen to "7 Days." A song from home feels like a salve.

This particular beach is frequented mostly by Westerners and I am the only one wearing a melhfa. When we arrive the children rush forward fearless, ready to be swept away. I hold my melhfa around me tightly but still it falls off; the edges drag mercilessly in the murky waters. Water rushes up to my knees, chilling, almost knocking me off balance. You all laugh watching me fight to stand amidst the rushing waves.

Dadah carries the kids into the water, taking turns one by one, on his back. He bends low in the water as waves rush towards them and rises up right before they are hit. We try to keep the other ones contained, hold their hands, and pull them back before they are swept out to sea. Neither of us can venture out as far as Dadah. He is a super hero. We are paralyzed by an unbidden fear, a desire to control.....we can be swept away, children can drown, can be lost forever. I watch in awe as Dadah bends down low, rises up...in awe to see the sheer joy on my

children's faces. They are like Dadah...fearless, assured....perhaps knowing we are never really in control.

I leave the water, find a place to sit in the sand. Soraya is ill so she follows me, sitting in the sand, laying her head in my lap. I press firmly against her back, knead knots out of her shoulders gently with my palms. There are two girls playing soccer in the sand. From America....from Europe. I am not sure. Their long legs glisten dark and lovely in the African sun. They move across the sand, barefoot and weightless rushing towards the ball, fighting for it. They push each other, tumble together, tangled limbs they fall full of energy and laughter. Wrapped in cold silk I am jealous. Jealous I cannot feel the sun on my skin, jealous of the obscenity of their bare legs. I imagine unwrapping myself from the melhfa, merging completely whole, fully formed. I imagine dropping its weight in the sand, walking barefoot on the beach, having you rub suntan lotion on my shoulders, down the length of my arms. The girls...they could be from America. They could share my language, my life, my culture. Looking at me they might never know we share anything at all.

Soraya and I sit and watch with fascination until you all tire from playing. You come to where I am. I try to rise but cannot. The bottom of the melhfa is waterlogged and it holds me against my will. You put your hand out to give me leverage. I force my way up. Walking back to the vehicle my melhfa is wet and dirty, hanging in all the wrong places. In the SUV I roll the window down. As we drive away, the wind pulls the melhfa off of my head, my hair dances in the breeze. And even though we are not alone, even though Dadah sits in the backseat holding the children on his lap, I find I cannot pull the melhfa back over my head.

Secrets

In Nouakchott everything is made of concrete—the homes, the businesses, stairwells. There is not the slightest hint of wood, sheetrock, or the vinyl siding found on American homes. We drive past cement buildings painted bright purples, garish pinks. I see a sign over an open doorway that reads “internet café” in English and has Arabic writing underneath. I peer through the doorway as we pass, glimpsing cheap plastic folding tables holding dilapidated desktop computers. Trash lines the edges of the streets. Stray goats and dogs, haggard and thin, serve as the only trash disposal system. They huddle around the piles, scavenging for food.

A friend drives Nouha and me to the market, to buy melhfes. We park in sand. Cars are a luxury and most people have walked. We enter the market, passing stands of knock-off sunglasses, purses and jewelry, rows of fresh fruit. We walk up a flight of stairs to spaces for melhfa merchants. We stop in one shop and Nouha motions for me to “look.” I peruse rows of melhfa but find none I like.

At another shop we stop, go inside. We are invited to sit on the floor and drink tea. Nouha brings her fingers to her lips, moving them back and forth, blowing lightly against the tips. This gesture means I can smoke. I light a cigarette. Nouha motions for my pack. I hand it to her. She takes one, lights it with a match, and begins to smoke. I have never seen her smoke. I have only seen her discreetly sniff a tobacco, some women take in through their nose, off the end of her pinkie.

She smiles at me, says, “Secret. You no tell Brahim.”

I smile, tell her “Okay.” I am thrilled, in a culture that seems to be grounded in rules, to be a part of doing the wrong thing...thrilled to keep this illicit secret from the oldest brother.

In a culture where there is no dating, where many marriages are still arranged, where men and women are often not allowed alone together, no one asks how you and I might have met. Our meeting and the year before we married are a quiet secret, but one that is easy to keep because it is a story no one wants to know anyway.

We met five days before September 11th....a date that would be less significant except for the fact that you are both Arabic and Muslim. I remember in the aftermath of 9/11, finding an old-fashioned “WANTED” sign with a picture of Ossama Bin Laden on it hanging on the entry to your apartment complex. It read “Wanted: Dead or Alive. Terrorists living in this building.” I shook with outrage at it, but you laughed it off.

When we met you told me your name was Bryan, an obvious lie. You also told me you were from Morocco, a less obvious lie. You told these lies easily, like you had been telling them a long time. I had just read “Stolen Lives: 20 Years in a Desert Jungle” by Malika Oukfir. I told you about the story, trying to impress you with my feigned extensive knowledge of Moroccan political history. You did not seem impressed and my reading did not evoke the conversation I desired.

In the beginning weeks at your apartment, shared with 4 friends, you took your bag from the top of your closet and spread you photos across the bed. Sitting on your mattress I leafed through photos of you in Florida, in flight school. You had come here to train to be a pilot for your country in May of 2000. You even started school at the same one the terrorists had

attended. You had a handful of pictures....in them your face is serious, never smiling....you are wearing shades, sitting in the cockpit of a small plane, standing in front of the plane, dressed in uniform with your hands on your hips. You look younger, thinner, and sterner than what you are in real life. At the end of the stack are two pictures of you with your family, taken on the day you left. You have only been gone a year and seeing the photos evokes a certain tenderness inside of me. You have kept the log of the hours you flew in flight school, never finishing, and never returning home to be a pilot. Political unrest in your country caused you to flee flight school and seek asylum. The flight log is important to you. You in fact still have it even today, packed away in the same bag you took from your closet years ago.

When we meet I am thoughtful and serious. When I am alone I think, even back then, of the tenuous ties we have to our family. But when we are together we do not talk about family. You are young and happy, unbound by adult responsibilities it seems. You are not ready for a family of your own, certainly not prepared to be a father. Yet I have a son, Jacob, who is already two years ago. Trying to begin my career as a teacher, young, newly divorced with a toddler, love seems a dangerous affair. I am broken and I no longer think in terms of love. I recognize you too must be broken. I believe brokenness only attracts brokenness. It is an unlikely union, you and I. An even more unlikely success.

I tell you, "Bryan is not your name."

You smile sheepishly. *Of course it is not.*

"Brahim. My name is Brahim or Ibrahim....like Abraham in English."

"No one should ever lose their name," I tell you.

You are hidden, not used to this closeness. In my spare time I research Mauritania, once you tell me the true name of your birth country. I find the country is a land of nomadic farmers with only a few cities. I see pictures of open fish markets close to the sea, bearded men pulling goats and herding cattle, women wrapped in melhfa. I read the history I can find. I tell you everything I read and you smile and say, "Yes. That is true." You are exotic, an unfolding mystery. I barely understand from where you come. I am reckless, fearless. And I understand I am different. Different to you. Special. Your name. Your home. These pictures. These moments. I know instinctively these are between us. Their own type of intimacy. A rare virginity.

Gezara

Your step-mother, Maima, says we will have a reception, with food and traditional Mauritanian music, in my honor. In the weeks leading up to our trip we watched countless videos of Mauritanian wedding receptions. The bride, covered in a black melhfa arranged so her face was hidden from everyone including the groom, was not the center of attention. Instead, the focus was on the singers and the female reception guests who would rise one or two at a time to dance. I had laughed at the Mauritanian singers...their voices sounded all wrong--off key and off time with the music. But you had laughed at me and said at home everyone is amazed Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey are known as famous singers...their voices sound all wrong--off key and off time with the music. This was one of my first lessons in the depth of cultural differences.

I am excited about the reception but also nervous. I am not the bride and yet this seems to be a “coming out.” I cannot shake the sense I will be judged: as a woman, as a Western, and as your wife. I dress my face meticulously. Sitting at the vanity in our bedroom I line my eyes and my lips thickly, brush blush darkly onto my cheekbones, fill in my lined lips with my favorite Merle Norman lipstick. I don my best melhfa, a beautiful pink silk--a gift from Maima. I place my best jewelry—a set of gold earrings, bracelet, and ring that is a gift from Daday’s wife—in my ears, on my fingers, on my wrists. I dab my favorite perfume, Estee Lauder’s *Pleasures*, on my wrist and behind my ears. In the mirror I look stunning...someone else entirely. I hold out my hands, tattooed with intricate henna artwork, and admire the contrast of gold against the bright orange lattice.

When I am finished I wait for your younger brother, Molai, to arrive and take me to the reception. We drive separately. Maima and her friends drive in one car. Soraya, Kevah, Celam, Nouha, and I follow them in another car. We drive for miles on the highway, looping and turning, going this way and that, returning from where we started. We are lost and Molai is a poor driver-- always too close, slamming on his brakes or blaring his horn. He rolls down the window and shouts words I can only assume are curses. He is short, shorter than me...a tiny young man. Later that night we will laugh about this, say he suffers from “small man disease.” Molai stops and calls Maima. Directions are given. We set off again. Finally, we arrive.

The home is in a neighborhood called Gezara, although I do not know that at the time...will only learn this later that night when I am recounting the story to you. We park beside a cement structure with no roof. All around are shacks, ramshackle houses formed from scavenged wood, metal, and even trash. I step tentatively out of the vehicle and my feet hit hard sand. Soraya steps out and grabs my hand. They lead us into a house. On one side sits ten ladies, all reception guests. On the other side of the room sits a woman surrounded by children...eight or ten. I am not sure how many. The youngest one, a baby, lies in her lap as she breast feeds him, exposed and unashamed. They lead me to my seat, everyone making the traditional greeting *Shahalak! Yak Le Bass?* A woman, who speaks English, tells me the singers could not come because someone from the tribe has died; it is tradition for no music to be sung or played on the day this occurs. She apologizes profusely and tells me we will still eat and have a good time. I take my seat, trying to get comfortable. I am disappointed there will be no singing tonight, but more than that I am confused. This place does not resemble any Mauritanian reception we watched on Youtube. Looking around the room I am out of place...a show-off, a bragger wearing fancy jewelry sitting in a home that has no roof.

Douche....Bathroom I say to Nouha. She leads me out of the house and through the sand towards what appears to be a dilapidated outhouse. Pushing open the door I peer inside but there is not enough light for me to see. I pull my melhfa up to my mid calves and step inside. I hear the scurry of feet across the wooden floor. I shut my mind off to the thought of rats and giant cockroaches, which I am sure inhabit this dense environment, and I step inside. There is no toilet but two wooden slats nailed to the floor with a large hole in the middle. I pull my melhfa up as high as it will go. I yank down my underwear and take out one foot. The underwear hangs loose and absurd at my ankle. I am not sure how to position my feet, how to squat down to hit the hole. I am preoccupied by my underwear that is touching the damp wood where any number of insects, spiders, or varmints are scurrying. In my attempt to pee, urine goes everywhere, possibly missing the hole entirely. In Mauritania people do not typically use toilet paper and I have forgotten my spare roll at home. I do not have time to drip dry so I maneuver my underwear up and squeeze my legs together hoping the fabric absorbs the moisture.

When I am done Nouha opens the door completely which until that point has been poised at a slight crack. She says, "Dorothy, watch," and steps into the outhouse herself. She is the same weight as me and yet she has none of the struggles I just experienced. With ease she plants one foot firmly on each wooden slat. Lifting her melhfa and dress up high above her waist she squats low over the hole until it looks as if her bottom might fall in. Like many women she does not wear underwear and I now understand why. The moon's light illuminates the curve of her calves strong and muscular, the slight arch of her back, her bottom bare and raised. It is obscene and transfixing.....this absolute comfort in one's self.

Beggars

The original Mauritanian culture was defined by tribes. And although the tribes are no longer officially recognized, there is still a lingering and far-reaching effect of tribal association. Yours was a “warrior” tribe which is not hard to imagine. There are tribes of lawyers, scholars, and religious leaders. Each tribe has their own artists, who do henna, and singers and poets, who entertain, and even their own slaves. Although slavery was abolished in 1984, its effects and presence remain palatable, especially to an outsider.

In every home we go....no matter how poor the family is...they most certainly have a maid. A person who lives and eats with the family for free in exchange for caring for the home and preparing the meals. You tell me the average pay a maid receives, in addition to room and board, is around 60 US dollars a month. What stands out to me the most, even more so than the meager pay and living conditions, is the fact the maids are always black. A fact which speaks to the history of the country: one in which the Arabic conquest of Mauritania led to the persecution and enslavement of the original native Africans.

When we arrived beggars met us in the parking lot of the airport. You told me they knew we were coming and more importantly they knew we were coming from America. On the streets of Nouakchott I see beggars everywhere. Traffic moves slow, never above 30 miles per hour. They line the paved highways, the unpaved sand roads. Those who are blind reach their hands out towards our windows, rapping softly on the glass. Mothers carry babies on their hips, strapped to their backs, in the blistering sun. There are beggars without legs, without arms. They

put tin cans on their stumps and use them to walk up and down the highway median. One legless man puts flip flops on his hands and uses them to scoot across the sand, his empty pant legs trailing in the sand behind him. On the streets children who might be in school skip out to sell fresh mint and high jacked phone cards. No one is concerned about these children. After several weeks even I come to realize the purposelessness of education in a place where there are no jobs and no opportunity....in a place where your status within the tribe determines whether you find employment or find yourself a beggar. We are always rolling down our windows, reaching out our hands and giving someone a coin, a bill. We are easy targets because I always make eye contact, unable to look away, turn a blind eye. And what I notice time again as we drive through the streets of Nouakchott is that just like the maids, the beggars are always black.

Molai is driving and we stop at a local convenient store to buy some drinks. In the parking lot stands an old man with a cloth wrapped around his head and a host of barefoot and dark skinned children. The old man opens his jacket to reveal several books with Arabic writing on the cover. You leave the car and speak to the man in Hassaniya. You try to hand him some bills. But he does not want the bills. He is not begging. He wants you to buy a book. You tell him you do not want a book, but will give him the bills. He refuses. You turn away to go into the store and he attempts to follow you. When you ignore him, he turns his attention to our vehicle.

He comes around the side of vehicle. He raps softly with his knuckles and opens his jacket, again revealing the books. Molai mouths “no” and shakes his head. I keep my eyes forward, unwilling to make contact. He continues to knock at the window and Molai, becoming angry, shouts at him in Hassaniya. He is still unperturbed. Others, mostly children, in the parking lot become aware of the commotion. They move towards our car and surround it.

A million hands rap on the window. They hold up sprigs of tied mint, phone cards, and bundles of sticks which are used for cleaning the teeth. Our kids are bewildered, wide-eyed and silent in the backseat. Amir, on my lap in the front, seems the most disturbed. He begins to yell “NO, NO” and hits at the windows from the inside. When this outburst does not cause the children to move away from his window, he begins spitting wildly at the window on our side. I try to hold him down, put my hands over his eyes, but he cannot be contained.

Molai steps out of the car just as you come out of the store. The beggars make room for you to open the door. Molai begins to yell at the old man, acting as if he might hit him. But you smile amicably and lead Molai into the backseat. You take over driving. When you start the vehicle, the group parts. But we move forward slowly, carefully. In the side view mirror I see the swarm of children as we pull away, dirty and barefoot. The old man with his haggard eyes and overgrown beard. I feel we have narrowly avoided something disastrous, although I am not sure what.

Bouzouma

At your father's house, the women sit on one side of the room, the men on the other. You have told me to not extend my hand forward to shake a man's unless he extends his first. Strict cultural rules are in place here. When I want to have a cigarette I sneak away—to a place where your father will not see me. To allow an elder male relative to see you smoking is disrespectful.

Your father's cook, Muhammed, lets me sit in his room off the side of the kitchen so I can smoke a cigarette in privacy. He is from Liberia and speaks the smallest amount of English. He has no home. Your father's home is his home. The room contains all of his possessions. It is smaller than my own bedroom. The floor is concrete and a padlock hangs on the metal door. Half of an uneaten melon sits on a shelf. An open bag of rice lies on the floor. A thin bare mattress lies in one corner and a rolled up sleeping bag is on its edge. I sit in a corner on a wooden chair, prop the metal door open with my foot, and smoke in secrecy. Everything here is stifled. The rules are important. The cook, Muhammed, is obviously gay. To know this I must rely upon stereotypes....the way he walks delicately and light footed, the gestures of his hands when he talks which tend to be a little too flamboyant, the high pitch of his voice. I am interested to find that in a culture where there is no acceptance of open homosexuality, where people of the same sex do not marry or have intimate sexual relationships, where no person grows up viewing homosexuality on television or amongst their friends and family, still homosexuality exist, is known, and recognized by the same stereotypes and expectations.

I am oddly happy he is gay though. Because he is gay, although his sexual preference is never acknowledged, spoken of, or accepted, I am able to be led to his little room to smoke in secrecy. This secret is the only reason we can talk openly...more openly than I am able to speak with almost any other male in the culture. He is always happy, smiling, and enjoys the frequent compliments I offer on his cooking.

“I will come to America,” he tells me.

“When?”

“Soon...I save money.”

“That is good.”

“I will come see you. Give me your number.”

He takes out a pen and a small notepad and I write my cell phone number down for him.

“Do you like it here?” I ask him.

“Yes...in Mauritania it is easy. You no need papers. Nothing. In America. It is hard.

There are rules. Must have papers.”

I smile, “I know.”

Every time we visit Bouzouma’s house I find my way to Muhammed’s little room. This space is one of the only places I can truly hide. One day I find the padlock on his door closed. I pull at the door fruitlessly. Muhammed hearing me, comes out.

I smile, embarrassed. “I was trying to go smoke.”

He smiles back at me. “No,” he says, “today I have friend visiting. He is ill. He is in there.”

“Oh,” I am at a loss for words. His “friend” feels secretive and illicit. But I am also relieved. Relieved that Muhammed has a friend...that even in Mauritania he might happiness.

“Come, I will show you where.”

He leads me to a room in the front courtyard. It has a glass door and I push it open and step inside. Smoke-filled air assaults me. The room is large but almost completely bare except for various sleeping bags in different corners of the room. The floor looks hard and is covered in a thin, bare, dark blue carpet. Muhammed leaves me. There is nowhere to sit so I leave the door cracked and stand beside it to smoke. I can easily move further in if your father, Bouzouma, were to come in or out of the courtyard.

You have told me your father dislikes Maima’s male friends, perhaps even dislikes the cook. You tell me he calls them “gays” and waves his hands in annoying dismissal when talking about them. There are other gays in the culture--a famous singer who comes to visit us and who you must pay money to simply because he has visited. I disagree with giving him money but as in most things I am silenced. Giving this gift is expected of you. You tell me if you do not give him money as a gift he will “gossip” about you, let everyone know how cheap you are. And while you say you do not care, the reputation of the entire family, depends upon your actions. You tell me that men who play “drums” are gay. My friends and I will laugh about this claim for years to come; that one might be able to determine someone’s sexual preferences based on an instrument. This fact seems absurd but when you speak of it, it is real. Playing the drums is a thing you have said your sons can never do.

Home Alone

During our final week in Nouakchott you begin to leave me alone at the apartment while you play soccer with your brothers. I am simultaneously thrilled and terrified to have these stolen moments. I sit on the balcony in the breeze with my head uncovered, melhfa hanging about my shoulders. I take out the journal my aunt Karen bought me as a gift before we left the states. I journal my thoughts, my fears. After a while I try to use my phone to gain an internet connection so I can write on my blog. I pace the balcony to try and find the right spot to connect. Usually I am unsuccessful.

Despite the joy of this moment I am cognizant of an impending threat. There is no 9-1-1 system in Nouakchott. I have no working landline or cell phone. I do not know the word for *help* in Hassaniya. I do not even know my own address. You have told me people know this is our apartment...the apartment of Americans--although we are middle class, we are undeniably rich to the people of this country. There is nothing of any value in our apartment. The windows are barred to stop thieves. I have been treated with nothing but kind graciousness and an unmeasurable level of generosity during my stay. But you are my anchor...the only thing tethering me to the culture. Home alone I am not sure that as a Westerner...as an American woman I would be afforded the same kindness without you nearby.

Later you return and have brought your friend. We leave the apartment, heading towards your mother's house to gather up our children. We stop at a gas station. You and your friend leave the vehicle, going to the opposite side to pump the gas and talk to the service attendant. On

the other side I open my door, hang my legs out of car, strike a match to light a cigarette. My melhfa has ridden up so that my skin shows up to the mid-calf. Alone, at night, with no one to see I let it hang this way. A car swings into the parking lot traveling fast. The car passes us quickly but not before the passenger side door opens and I see four young men inside. The one who opens the door sticks his tongue out, puts his balled up fist to his crotch, and makes an up and down pumping motion simulating masturbation. Erupting in laughter, the car of young men drives off.

I look back at you but you are still talking to the attendant oblivious to what has happened. I shudder to myself and close the door. Back in the car I tell myself, "They are just dumb kids." Yet I am aware of a particular violence that has been perpetrated against me. In this culture I am an anomaly, a rare specimen, a strange artifact. I am not strange just because I am light-skinned nor because I am a non-Muslim, but because I am a woman and a particular type of woman....a woman from the West...a woman from America. A woman who has held boys' hands and exchanged heated kisses in the back row of a movie theatre...a woman whose marriage was not arranged, who has male friends, sits alone in a room with male co-workers. A woman who has had done any number of illicit acts, either real or imagined. I pull my melhfa around my face so it covers me perfectly. But I am a Westerner...an American...a different kind of woman and even the melhfa, with its elaborate folds and beautiful designs cannot hide that fact.

Our Last Night

On our last night we leave our apartment, pack our bags into the SUV, and go to your mother's house to sleep. At her house I bathe the kids in the small bathroom. Nouha brings a bucket of cold water and a cup for dipping it out. I bathe the kids one by one, pouring cold water down their backs, using the extra shampoo I am leaving for your sisters as soap. I put on their pajamas and send them to the sitting room to sleep on the floor. It is the only room in the house that has air conditioning. It is usually too expensive to use the air conditioning but tonight, for them, an exception is made. I go and wash myself next. The cold water feels relieving as it runs down my neck, across my back, down my chest. When I am done, wrapped in my melhfa I feel sticky and hot, without warm water it feels as if soap residue is trapped in the folds of my skin. For your turn Nouha has the maid bring in new water. Everything is being prepared for you and I feel strange to once again not be the one preparing. To have no role, no place in this.

After our baths we meet on the rooftop. The air is cool and it is the only place mosquitos will not find you. People come in and out. To visit. To say their good-byes. They bring us parting gifts: traditional African pillows, colorful melhfas, jewelry, a traditional tea set, art. Your family members who have no money, no way to get to work, perhaps do not even a job, and have very little food, find a way to bring me a gift. I do not want the gifts but I must accept them. Later, I will leave most of them, along with many of my own possessions, in your sister's armoire. I cannot imagine returning home with everything I came with.

On the roof top everyone laughs and shares stories. I cannot understand and yet I do understand. I know what it means to be with family, to share a life and a history, to know the

hidden meanings, the inside jokes. I feel a sudden desire to share myself. I get my lap top with its faulty battery and log onto Facebook. I show your sisters, your aunt pictures of my father, my mother, my brothers and sisters. I show them pictures of Soraya's art. The battery dies after 10 minutes and I am left feeling alone and angry. I have been here a long time and never thought to show them these things. I realize I have left myself behind...and now it is too late.

After several hours your Uncle, along with his wife, arrive to say good-bye. His wife hands me a lovely melhfa, burnt orange with darkened black moons across the fabric; a parting gift. I take the melhfa, run my fingertips across the fabric....*Shukran*...Thank you I say in a bashful way, still uncomfortable speaking the language, still unaccustomed to receiving gifts.

Your Uncle has sat down beside you. I have rarely seen him during our visit but when you speak of him your eyes shine. You have never been able to express emotions easily with words but the love you feel is easy to see. You have told me he was always poor, had little, but that as a boy he would sacrifice anything for your needs or even your wants. I know he lives on the outskirts of town and walks several miles to work daily in lose sandals across the hard sand. He has a limp, one leg slightly shorter than the other, a disfigurement from childhood, which makes the walk that much harder. I cannot see his face....the bottom half of it is covered by a bandana, tied around his head. He has had a tumor removed from his lower jaw. The removal has left a gaping hole where teeth and bone are exposed. His food is crushed, liquefied, and drunk through a straw.

We had hopes he may come to America one day. He sent his medical records so a doctor may look at them and consider repairing his jaw. But it is impossible. The doctor would have to do the surgery for free. He is an old man, not a child. Who would do it?

I am reminded of when we sent money to Mauritania...to help him travel to Morocco for the procedure that would remove the tumor from his jaw. Handing that money over sat like a stone, hard and jagged in my stomach....*it is always something*, I thought. I almost cried seeing the two hundred dollars handed over to the lady at Western Union. Now it feels my anger was wasted. I feel infinitely small with my memories. Watching you with your Uncle now, money seems nothing more than paper.

I understand even the melhfa, my parting gift, was likely bought with money we gave to them. Rather than buy food, they had spent money on a parting gift for me—a person who needs nothing. That night, after everyone except the immediate family leaves, I pull out my melhfas, all the other gifts I have been given, and even the jewelry I bought from Belk's in my hometown mall and I begin to unpack them. I leave all of my melhfas, except for two. I pack my jewelry, my make-up in Ziploc bags. I place it all in the bottom of the broken down green armoire in the smoking room. Still I keep some of my jewelry, the best pieces. Back at home the jewelry will hold less significance. I will misplace the pieces. Rediscovering them at inopportune times underneath the bed, in the cracks between the car cushion, in the crevices of drawers. I will pluck them out and remember this moment.

After everyone leaves but your mother, your aunts, your sisters and brothers, we try to find sleep. We lie in a pile. On the roof. Under the tent. In the cool breeze. We lie. 5 of us. 10 of us. 15. I am not sure. We share covers and our limbs tangle together. A deep intimacy. Some of us lay but decide not to sleep. We have to be at the airport at 5am. You doze off and on but I find I cannot sleep. Dadah makes tea. We drink it all night long. With everyone gone I can tell

the conversation is more at ease, there is a comfort...one shared by siblings and the closest of family.

Before the sun rises we pack the kids and our bags into Molai's small car. We have had to return the SUV. Your mother, Celam, Dadah, and Nouha get into the car. Nana is on the porch and I realize she will not go but will stay at the house with the boys. She is crying soundlessly and on her face is grief...an expression I understand. We drive to the airport wordlessly. We arrive early. We unfold our bodies from the vehicle and sit in the parking lot. You move around a lot. Talk quietly to Dadah....then to Molai. The call to prayer sounds...its echo a chilling and haunting poetry across the still-darkened city. You pray alongside your mother and Celam in the parking lot. Your bodies share a distinct rhythm. Afterwards your mother has you step in the sand barefoot and collects the sand placing it in a small bag, an old tradition. Nouha and Dadah bring us sweet bread, that tastes similar to a donut or perhaps a coffee cake, and we sit in the parking lot, breaking off pieces and eating.

Home Coming

Back in the states I am relieved and forlorn. We are staying at your friend's house in New York. Your friend picks us up from the airport and takes us to stay the night at his apartment in Brooklyn. He works as a taxi driver and lives there with his wife and two children. The apartment is cramped, but we do not want to spend money on a hotel room in New York. When we arrive his wife is cooking...traditional Mauritanian food. The house is fragrant but the smell makes me nauseous.

"How was Mauritania? It was good?" Your friend asks me.

I am sitting in the floor of the living. Their living room follows the traditional Mauritanian style so there is no couch, just a carpeted floor and low cushions.

"It was good. Zahna," I tell him and smile. But my smile feels forced. I am starving but the pungent aroma of Mauritanian food makes my stomach revolt.

I sit in the floor of the apartment. I feel petulant and childish. I want to be alone. I know I must seem rude and unforgiving. I tell you I am going for a walk. I wander the streets of Brooklyn aimless and unafraid. No one knows what I have seen....I understand I have nothing to fear. I order chicken nuggets at McDonald's but my stomach protests. I eat only three and throw the rest away. I buy a pack of Marlboro Light 100's for 11.00 dollars in Brooklyn. In Nouakchott they cost me 1.25 a pack. I feel entirely different, but for the most part people on the streets of Brooklyn are oblivious to my change. Only one lady notices...I am walking back to the apartment when I am stopped by an elderly, light-skinned female, wearing a head scarf. She

grabs my hands, both of them. Turning them over she traces the designs of my henna with her fingertips. She brings them to her face, speaks to me in a language I do not understand. She begins to weep.

“Yemen? Yemen?” She asks me.

I smile, allowing her to hold my hands, to put them to her face.

“No,” I say, “Mauritania. My husband is from Mauritania.”

“My daughter, Yemen,” she says.

I do not know the other things she attempts to communicate, but my henna-stained palms seem to bring her joy. Perhaps they remind her of home, of daughters, of sons, of parents. This I understand.

Originally, we had planned to stay in New York for a few days to go sightseeing, do some shopping. But we leave early, after a few hours rest at the apartment in Brooklyn. Our plan is to drive all night, all the way home. I am anxious to return to my normal life. We take turns driving, even pull over on the side of the road to sleep. It doesn't work and in Virginia we give in, finding a hotel sometime around midnight.

We take hot showers. The mattresses are an undeniable luxury. I turn on my side, savoring the feel of the comforter, and you wrap your body around mine, pulling me to you. For a moment it is like old times, this comfort, knowing every curve and fold of each other's bodies. A comfort we could never find in Nouakchott. But it is different now. Grief has settled in our bones...found a place beneath the covers, crowding out everything else.

When we are back at home I savor a hot shower, Zest soap, a soft washcloth. My house has changed. We have faulty plumbing, a broken fence, holes in the wall and yet it is mine. I wash the laundry, a never-ending task for our family, with joy. I cook regular meals. I pick-up Chinese take-out which I eat in the living room sitting on a leather couch with my legs tucked under me as I watch my favorite television show. I talk for unending hours to my friends and family on the phone. I buy large batches of toilet paper, toothpaste, shampoo. I make myself ice cold glasses of Coke. Everything is easy. Seems easier than before. At night though I lie down on my bed, on my soft mattress, and I cannot find sleep. I am thinking of the roof top, lying on a pallet under the stars, the shape of the moon, the call to prayer. I am thinking of Fatamat, Nouha, Nana and I wonder if they are lying under the stars thinking of us.

I hold my children, trace the shape of their fingers, the outline of their faces, feel the way their bodies curve into mine. I think of another mother who held her baby just as close. Until one day she didn't. I think of the passage of time...the way poetry feels...a rhythm understood in any language. I think of the hard edge of grief...the churning weight of our losses. I think of the spirit and how even while lying on my firm mattress, a part of me remains on the rooftop in Nouakchott. I take out my journal, my pen. I feel a song rising inside of me, intricately beautiful and endlessly painful. I press my pen to paper and try to find the courage to write it.